

UNANIMOUS CONSENT REQUEST—
EXECUTIVE CALENDAR

Mr. TESTER. Mr. President, I would ask unanimous consent that the Senate proceed to executive session to consider the following nominations en bloc: Calendar Nos. 151, 152, 153, and 154; that those nominations be confirmed en bloc; that the motions to reconsider be considered made and laid upon the table with no intervening action or debate; that no further motions be in order to any of the nominations; and that the President be immediately notified of the Senate's action and the Senate then resume legislative session.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Is there objection?

The Senator from Tennessee is recognized.

Mrs. BLACKBURN. Mr. President, I reserve the right to object, and I rise to object to this unanimous consent request.

The VA, for years, has made promises that they have year after year failed to meet. For years, veterans and their family members have called my office, whether I was in the State senate or over in the House or here in the Senate. They are distressed by the lack of service they receive from the VA. My caseworkers would work tirelessly with these constituents, only to end up frustrated by a very unresponsive VA. This is unacceptable. It has become the culture of the VA, and this is something that has to change.

Now, for weeks, the committee has been asking for feedback on legislative proposals which have the potential to affect the workflow and the capacity of the VA. The VA has been silent on this even though we have asked for their views and have asked them to weigh in. The reason we have asked them for this is the VA has a backlog of over 180,000 cases. Their wait times this year have continued to escalate. They are not going down.

So, yesterday, I had a call with Secretary McDonough expressing my concerns with the lack of feedback that the committee has received on what is shaping up to be the most consequential legislative effort in the veterans space in an entire generation. The formal response that I received today was incomplete, but it contained a promise that they would have more fulsome feedback by July 30.

I will continue to keep my hold on these pending VA nominees until I receive the official views on the COST of War Act, on the toxic exposures bills. We owe our veterans. We owe it to them to get this right. Therefore, I object to the unanimous consent request, and I will continue my hold on these nominees.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Objection is heard.

The Senator from Montana is recognized.

UNANIMOUS CONSENT REQUEST—
CALENDAR NO. 153

Mr. TESTER. Mr. President, I will rephrase this one more time.

I would ask unanimous consent that the Senate proceed to executive session to consider the following nomination: Calendar No. 153—for those who want to know, that is Matthew T. Quinn of Montana; that the nomination be confirmed and the motion to reconsider be considered made and laid upon the table with no intervening action or debate; that no further motions be in order to any other nomination; and that the President be immediately notified of the Senate's action and the Senate resume legislative session.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Is there objection?

Mrs. BLACKBURN. I object.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Objection is heard.

Mr. TESTER. Mr. President.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Montana is recognized.

Mr. TESTER. Last month, four well-qualified, noncontroversial nominees were unanimously voted out of the Veterans' Affairs Committee—unanimously voted out of the Veterans' Affairs Committee, which Senator BLACKBURN sits on. Here is who these people are:

Don Remy, a veteran, has been nominated as VA Deputy Secretary—VA Deputy Secretary. That is second in command. If Senator BLACKBURN wants quick reaction from the VA on toxic exposure, maybe Senator BLACKBURN shouldn't hold that nominee of the No. 2 position of the Department, a nominee specifically tasked with coordinating VA's work with the Defense Department, which includes issues like—guess what—toxic exposure. But that is all right. We will leave him sitting at home. We will leave the veterans out in the cold.

Then there is Patricia Ross, who is nominated to be Assistant Secretary for Congressional Affairs. So if Senator BLACKBURN wants more information from the VA on legislation and how much it costs, maybe the Senator shouldn't hold the nominee tasked with getting that information from the VA to Congress, but she is.

Then, there is Maryanne Donaghy, nominated as Assistant Secretary for Accountability and Whistleblower Protection. I want to tell you that whistleblowers regularly come to us with reports of waste, fraud, and abuse.

Folks love to condemn the VA—we've heard a lot about it a second ago—when it fails to hold its workforce accountable. I recommend that, if Senator BLACKBURN wants to request accountability at the VA, maybe the Senator shouldn't hold the nominee tasked with employee accountability and whistleblower protection.

Then, there is Matt Quinn—someone that I know very, very well because he comes from the State of Montana—for director of cemetery affairs. So when people die, no one is there in the VA to take care of this issue.

Once again, all four people—critically important people—whom the Senator voted for to get out of committee are now being held by the Senator.

I am going to tell you that, if we want to hold the VA accountable today in a situation where we are coming out of a pandemic, this is not the way to do it. The bottom line is that if you want a VA that can function, then, we have to have that VA staffed up.

Don't talk to me or anybody else in this body about distressed veterans and then say: You know what. We are going to stop the No. 2. We are going to stop the VA person who is supposed to talk to us. We are going to stop the cemetery person. We will stop the whistleblower person. That is really helping veterans.

Quite frankly, it is just the contrary.

I pride myself on running a committee that is very bipartisan, and the VA Committee may be the best, not because of me but because of people like JERRY MORAN, JOHN BOOZMAN, people like PATTY MURRAY. Those people step up to the plate every day, and they do what is right for veterans.

Let's talk about the toxic exposure bill. Let's talk about that bill. In World War I, we had mustard gas. The VA had no capacity to deal with those veterans. In World War II, we had radiation. The VA had no capacity. In the Vietnam war, we had Agent Orange. And, by the way, they died, they died, and they died again because this body refuses to give the VA the tools they need to take care of our veterans, and now we are doing the same thing with burn pits.

I am here to tell you that I had a veteran stand up in my very first year on the VA Committee. A Vietnam veteran stood up in the back of the room in a townhall and said: You are not going to treat this generation of veterans like you treated ours, the Vietnam veterans.

Well, I tell you what: If we want to close the door and we want to delay and we want to push back what is going on with burn pits, then, let's have them die.

You were at the hearing that the lung transplant guy was at. We had to juggle that hearing so he could even be at it because he was on medication.

The bottom line is people are dying every day.

By the way, we are still not done with Agent Orange, hypertension, and MGUS, which are in this bill. They will die. Some more of them will die.

We send our young people off to war. They come back changed, and we don't have the guts to step up and debate the bill. When I give the ranking member the authority to stop that bill from coming to the floor, we are still going to make excuses? Give me a break.

I am going to tell you what. I have been in this body for probably too long. We turn around and we try to do the right things, and we have people who say: You know, send our young people off to war at the drop of the hat. Send them off to war. Send them off to war.

And then they come back, and they are changed, and we say we are not going to take care of them because we need information right now, this very minute, when it is not even on the floor. We need the information—when I have already made a commitment to the ranking member that we are going to have this information. But, no, what we are going to do is we are going to stop the VA from having a slate of candidates so they can do their jobs and service the veterans.

Guess what. I am not a veteran. This doesn't impact me, but it impacts the veterans in my State, some 100,000 of them—1 in 10 Montanans—and, in fact, veterans all across this country.

We can sit here and we can play these games of holding up nominees to fill critical Agency departments, and we can play them and play them and play them again, and we can say we are doing it on behalf of the veterans. That is bull—you got it—total bull.

We have a job to do here, folks. If we don't want to confirm well-qualified folks, then, why don't we just shut down the VA? Why don't we tell McDonough that he is out of luck, that we are not going to send him any help? And then we start making demands.

The bottom line is this, folks: All the things Senator BLACKBURN is concerned about, I made a commitment with the ranking member that we are going to get those questions answered, and we will get them answered with good information. And then if the ranking member consents, we will have a vote and we will have debate, and we will make a determination whether this is the right thing to do.

But just to say, "No, we are stopping everything right now; no more toxic exposure bill until I get this information because we are not going to send you the staff to do your job," doesn't make a lot of sense to me. It doesn't make a lot of sense to me. And in the process our veterans suffer. That veteran who has hypertension dies—one less problem for the VA, because we created the problem right here today.

I would ask Senator BLACKBURN to reconsider her hold so we can get the VA the staff they need so they can do their job.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Tennessee.

Mrs. BLACKBURN. Mr. President, you know, it is truly an honor to work with the veterans in Tennessee, and we have hundreds of thousands of veterans in our State.

I know that the chairman says he prides himself in working with the veterans. I will tell you, quite frankly, I consider it a humbling experience to work with these veterans. Whether they are from World War II or Korea or Vietnam or whether they are from any of our recent wars—the Mideast—whether we are dealing with Agent Orange or burn pits, to me it is heart-wrenching to hear their stories.

And the VA has not done their job. So what we are doing is standing up for

these veterans and saying to the VA: Get your act together. Provide this information. How do you deal with this backlog? Do you have the capability to deal with what we are discussing? Do you have that capability? What is your capacity? How do we best handle these issues?

The VA, for years—decades, decades, decades—has not done their job in a timely manner, in a responsive manner to our Nation's veterans. Therefore, let's say: Let's get this right. Let's get it right.

Excuse me. There is a fly in this Chamber.

Let's get it right now.

CORONAVIRUS

Mrs. BLACKBURN. Mr. President, last week's conversations about our own government's role in the COVID coverup reflected over a year of refusal on the part of my Democratic colleagues to accept that the novel coronavirus may not have spread via natural transmission from a Chinese wildlife wet market.

As the theories of the pandemic's origins evolved, one remained, until very recently, off limits. This is, of course, the lab leak hypothesis, or the theory that the virus somehow escaped from a lab in Wuhan, China.

Now, this theory didn't come out of nowhere. In early January 2020, alarm bells were already ringing at the CDC, the State Department, and in the scientific community over problems with the natural origin theory of transmission.

Virologists and other public health officials studying the disease were quickly coming to the conclusion that the way the virus was spreading suggested that this theory was flawed. Officials also knew that the Wuhan Institute of Virology was conducting controversial and dangerous "gain of function" research with the help of repackaged U.S. Government grants.

Yes, that is correct.

In April of last year, I joined many of my colleagues in publicly demanding a thorough investigation into the lab leak theory. What followed was nothing less than moral panic. Activists, journalists, and even our own Democratic colleagues accused us of racism, xenophobia, and science denial.

Major media organizations refused to report on the hypothesis, except to decry it as a racist attack on Chinese scientists. Facebook banned accounts that posted about it. YouTube deleted videos that dared contradict the World Health Organization.

Rather than scaring us off, though, these attacks left us with another question to answer: Why did the very idea of investigating the Wuhan lab inspire such a bizarre panic? Or, perhaps, the better question is, Why did NIAID Director Dr. Fauci and the rest of the powers that be publicly insist that the idea of a lab leak was completely preposterous?

Even NIH Director Francis Collins hadn't ruled it out. In a March 2020 interview with the Atlantic, he said that while natural transmission was the likely culprit, "the possibility that such a naturally evolved virus might have also been under study at the Wuhan Institute of Virology and reached residents of Wuhan—and ultimately the rest of the world—as the result of a lab accident has never been adequately excluded."

We certainly have evidence to show that mistakes happen, even in a professional lab. Who could forget that back in 2015, we saw reports that personnel at a military facility in Utah accidentally shipped active samples of anthrax to labs in nine States—yes, a 2015 lab accident.

NIH has also had problems keeping track of things. According to a memo prepared in 2016 by a minority staff of the House Energy and Commerce Committee, a 2009 Department of Health and Human Services OIG audit found an inventory discrepancy at the NIH caused in part by mislabeled envelopes containing unregistered vials of plague and other antibiotic-resistant bacteria.

In 2012, NIH researchers found vials of anthrax spores in the wrong place. What is worse, the scientists in that particular lab weren't registered to possess them.

In 2014, an FDA researcher working at the NIH campus in Bethesda discovered vials of live smallpox virus stuffed in a cardboard box in an unsecured cold storage room.

Mistakes were clearly made. Lab accidents happen. It is also clear that while a leak from the Wuhan lab could have happened due to human error, this coverup we are now learning about certainly did not happen by error.

We now have an emerging picture of what did happen behind the scenes to create so much resistance to the lab leak theory.

On June 3 of this year, that bastion of rightwing insanity known as Vanity Fair magazine published an investigative report exposing the deranged political gamesmanship that prompted public health officials to paint the lab leak theory as a conspiracy.

The report confirmed just about everything those officials wanted to keep hidden—namely, that the lab leak hypothesis was suppressed at multiple levels of government by officials looking to protect their own interests and to distance themselves from President Donald Trump—so much for following the science. They were following emotions.

The report confirmed conflicts of interest concerning grant awards that supported gain-of-function research at the Wuhan Institute of Virology. The same people who knew that Chinese scientists were performing these dangerous experiments on the taxpayer dime also knew from verified intelligence reports that three Wuhan-based researchers fell ill with COVID-like symptoms in November 2019, well before the first reported outbreak. Still,